

Sustainable Development in Higher Education – A Swedish Perspective

Summary by Jason Rauch

Presentation by

Nils Brandt, *Senior Lecturer and Director of Studies, Department of Industrial Ecology, School of Energy and Environmental Technology, Royal Institute of Technology (KTH), Stockholm, Sweden**

*Workshop organizer

Sweden is a small country with a population of 9 million. Sweden is presently experiencing a large influx of immigrants, with 15 percent of the population having been born outside of the country. This cultural dynamic, as well as the country's dependence on foreign trade, has important implications in the arena of sustainability.

In Sweden, all universities and colleges are state owned. Tuition is free for all students, regardless of country of origin or citizenship. On top of this, the government provides loans to Swedish students in order to pay for living expenses like room and board. The university system is presently moving towards the "Bologna Guidelines," which establish standards for the number of years at each level of education in the European Union.

The Swedish parliament enacts statutes regarding universities that control, among other things, 1) what institutions exist 2) degree requirements 3) financial and other resources and 4) how many degrees can be granted per field. The university itself handles the curriculum and educational content. But the buildings in which the university is housed are owned by a state company separate from the institution that manages the operations of these facilities.

The Swedes have a strong environmental tradition. It has always been standard practice to have a public right to nature, where natural areas, whether public or privately owned, are treated as common spaces for all to use and for all to be responsible for. This tradition has been the foundation for Sweden's strong environmental stewardship.

The first international meeting on the environment, the UN Stockholm conference in 1972, occurred in Sweden. In 1988, Sweden made a commitment to no nuclear power, and the first Green party was elected into parliament. Sweden was a force behind and first adopter of the Rio conference of 1992's Local Agenda 21, which promoted environmental behavior and education.

Though the Swedish government does not require environmental education, it is strongly emphasized. In 1985 an Act was passed encouraging the teaching of environmental stewardship in school. In 1992 the Integrated Environmental Education Studies Program, commonly called the MINT-program, was created, focusing on environmental teaching at institutions of higher education. After the 2004 Gothenburg conference on International Consultation on Education and Sustainability, the Swedish government formed a committee on “sustainable education in Sweden.” The committee observed that environmental education focused too narrowly on environmental problems rather than on sustainable development. The committee suggested placing more thought into what type of graduates universities were producing. Were they prepared to lead a sustainable world? The committee also suggested that the focus on educating specialists deterred a multidisciplinary approach addressing attitudes and values. Educators, the committee concluded, lacked the necessary training, knowledge, and support for teaching sustainability broadly construed.

As a result of these identified shortcomings, the government proposed adding a clause to the Swedish Higher Education Act mandating the teaching of sustainable development at institutions of higher learning. The Act passed Parliament in December 2005. Today, the Act enjoys political consensus among all parties, both conservatives and social democrats.

For a long time Swedish students have received a comprehensive environmental education in lower school. The new clause in the Higher Education Act means that, once at university, that training is now rounded out with teaching in all three dimensions of sustainable development. This law states that: “universities will promote *sustainable development* through their *educational activities* in order to guarantee present and future generations a healthy environment, a strong economy and social welfare and justice.”

This important law requires universities to promote sustainable development through sustainability education. This top-down approach has been effective for promoting ideas of sustainable development in education. Problems with the legislation stem from the fact that universities themselves were not involved in writing it. An outsider prescribing what needs to be done within the university may not understand the local circumstances well enough to provide effective recommendations.

One example of a course that has grown out of the new law at the Royal Institute of Technology (KTH) is entitled “State and Trends.” It is a student-based, student-run course that examines the values associated with sustainable development. By asking questions related to what is in fact sustainable, the class assesses the sustainability of Stockholm 50 years ago, today, and 50 years hence. This course has proved effective in empowering students to take charge of their own education.

It is hoped that Sweden’s new legislated approach to sustainability education incorporates the social and economic dimension alongside the strictly environmental. While sustainability is not science, it is important to use the tools of science to achieve sustainability goals. In addition, it is essential to engage students in

the dialogue about sustainability. Bringing students to the table encourages them to take ownership for their own education. Taking a multidisciplinary approach to educating the next generation of leaders on sustainability is a positive step. This strategy will help universities reach beyond their walls to create partnerships with society at large.

DISCUSSION

Effects of the Top-Down Approach and the New Mandate

The top-down approach is pervasive in Sweden. In general, a national or municipal legislative process shapes university operations. For instance, Swedish universities differ markedly from most of their US counterparts in that the buildings on a Swedish university's campus are owned and operated by a separate state-owned corporation. As a result, Swedish university management has no say regarding the sustainability of facility operations. Though a top-down directive, the revision of the 2005 Higher Education Act leaves the specifics of curriculum development up to university management.

One listener pointed out that, in contrast, the U.S. does not have a top-down approach to sustainability. No leadership is provided for at the Federal level, but often at the State level there is leadership. The United Kingdom, also takes a top-down approach, but the result is that people expect the government to solve the problem for them, and no grass-roots work is really evident. The top-down process is slow and bureaucratic, and the students do not feel a sense of empowerment.

It is true that the system can leave students feeling disempowered. For example, students associations sent a letter to the presidents of Swedish Universities concerning sustainability issues, and no comment was received back.

Funding the new mandate has been an issue. The Swedish government has legislated for sustainable development, but money is lacking for funding green buildings and sustainable operations. The university has to pressure the state-owned company in order to improve buildings and operations.

There are few elective courses, but the number is program-dependent. The faculty is responsible for the curriculum, so the incorporation of sustainable development, relative to the core program, really depends on them.

Comparing Sweden to the United States

In terms of international perception, it is occasionally thought that having a person or group in the U.S. committed to sustainable development is a joke. This may be due to the fact that the U.S. has not joined the Kyoto protocol.

The U.S. experience suggests that education for sustainable development is perceived as irrelevant for other students outside of the environmental fields. In Sweden, consensus is building around the idea that sustainability education is important because it helps mobilize society outside of the university. Swedish society is demanding the application of sustainability in every day life, and it is the ultimate directive of universities to produce students that have the knowledge and skills to meet this demand.

